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EAST TIMOR - a visitor's impressions

September 1989

I went to East Timor from 1 to 11 September 1989. Getting into Dili presented no problems at all. Whether you are on a 2 month tourist visa or whether you are on a business visa, there are no extra papers needed.

At the immigration desk, passengers are met by smiling Mr Carlos, (from Los Palos), who works for the Indonesian intelligence and who speaks remarkably fluent English. Mr Carlos is pleasantly frank about his activities and pays one frequent brief visits at the Tourismo just when you are most unsuspecting, (like having dinner in the open air courtyard at night and reading 'Funu, the unfinished saga' by the light of your torch while chewing away on some very rubbery **ikan cumi cumi**), or while you are at the out-of-the-way Merpati office trying to book a flight to a destination not revealed to Intelligence!

For me one of the biggest problems was that you never knew whether you spoke to friend or foe, which made it difficult to be relaxed with the people around you or discuss the situation (more or less) openly. Even a probably harmless question by the waiter about tomorrow's plans makes you cagey.

For the initial four days in Dili, I was 'set upon' by a Timorese-Chinese business man, Vincente Ximenes, who got off the same (Denpasar) flight as me, (and who was later by the 3 students here identified as an unpleasant character who spies on others and works with the Indonesians). He constantly turned up at likely and unlikely places to take me to places (Liquica, Baucau, the races, the beaches, the Eastern parts of the island) from whose 'protection' and 'attentions' I eventually got away by daily jogging and a total change of scene, i.e. withdrawal to Suai and Zumalai on the southern coast of the island.

In between escapes from the clutches of Mr Carlos and this Vincente I managed to jog to the DIOSIS (which is the Church's office) regularly where I met Domingos Soares da Silva, a youngish Catholic priest, an excellent man, very active and committed to the question of Human Rights, and the writer of many of the reports which ACFOA or Amnesty receive. I have often wondered about the source of information in the reports on atrocities or violations of human rights in E.T. and it seems to work like this: Timorese (ex-prisoners, widows, **kepala desa**[2], villagers etc) come to him and other priests and report incidents either verbally or in writing. It seems priests are the only ones the population has confidence in to tell their distressing plight to and the gross injustices they are subjected to by the Indonesian military forces. This Domingos Soares had been the priest at the mission in Ossu until a year or so ago, where he had been maltreated (beaten and kicked around) by the Indonesians and was defamed as a Communist (the very last thing that he is - he is a concerned, compassionate, intelligent young Jesuit brother, and the point, I guess, I am trying to make, totally trustworthy.) I saw him on 4 occasions - and because his English is fairly limited - once in the company of the Director of the Seminary, Fr. Filomeno Jacob Abel (a Jesuit), Father Ricardo twice and Brother Beneditto down in Suai; and they all confirmed the intolerable oppression they are subjected to by the Indonesian military forces. Each one had many sorry stories to tell. It would fill pages, if I had time to launch into them, acts of gross arbitrariness, humiliation, cruel pay-back arrests and interrogations, shootings (using Timorese for target practice), rape, intimidation, violence...well, you know the catalogue. After meetings with the priests I felt sometimes quite sick, outraged, helpless and always overcome with humility. These people suffer dreadful injustices and do deserve better. What I was very

impressed with was their noble fighting spirit, their indomitable courage to resist and fight this oppression, rather than becoming cynical and drown.

The humorous side of all this was that I as a non-Church-goer went to five different church services, lengthy ones, Catholic and always in a foreign language - because this was the safest way to meet the brothers/fathers. The Bishop (Belo Ximenes) was in Malang and so unfortunately I could not get hold of him. Before I forget, Father Ricardo complained about intellectual starvation, (like most aware Indonesians) and I am sending him a few things, the latest copies of the New Scientist and other articles, he also requested literature, books of scientific nature and a course book on how to learn German. Perhaps if any of your friends come to Indonesia in the foreseeable future they could bring something worthwhile reading (in English), perhaps while even visiting East Timor could deliver it at the Motael Church.

Another great concern of the clergy was the blatantly obvious marginalisation of the East Timorese in their own country. This starts with the taxi drivers who either seem to be from Sulawesi or West Timor, but are rarely East Timorese, and the **warung** owners, down to shopkeepers (Chinese from Surabaya). Even the Tourismo is basically owned by a Chinese from Surabaya. Also the new Vice Governor of East Timor is Indonesian, (either Sumatran or Javanese). Even the relationship of the Indonesian Catholics working with the Timorese Catholics is strained and lack of mutual trust is a big problem. One member of the clergy even put it this way, 'they are probably here to spy on us. Our mentality, our perspective on life is so totally different from theirs; we are totally incompatible.'

One must wonder how the other sectors, education and health for instance, fare. Also law and business where decisions are made and the power rests, as far as one could see in a week, not with the Timorese. And now Indonesia and Australia have signed the Timor Gap agreement and all I can foresee is even more foreign domination.

I spent the first 4 or 5 days in Dili trying to get the feel of the place, figuring out which places one could travel to freely and which ones not, and trying to contact as many of the clergy as possible. Dili is really the place where you get all the information. Ossu, Venilale, and Viqueque seem to be frequently mentioned places of resistance. Venilale sounded worthwhile for a visit as there is a big orphanage there, also Ossu because a young Timorese Brother by the name of Fr Julio Crespius Ximenes Belo had been beaten bloody there recently and had then been flown by helicopter out of Ossu to Dili. The whole story of this Brother is very strange and I learned about the pre-history of these beatings from one of the four Brothers involved in this case in Suai. This Brother, Berndito dos Santos Freitas, a young man of about 20 from Liquice, had been training to become a priest in Malang, Central Java. He was there for a number of years together with 3 other Timorese Brothers, Fr José Antonio de Jesus Neves, Fr Domingos dos Santos and Fr Julio Crespius Ximenes Belo in this Catholic Seminary. They were found guilty by the Director of the Seminary, an Indonesian, of having patriotic illicit thoughts and accused of subversive extremist ideas, (and perhaps behaviour, this was not made plain), and sent home, back to Dili. In fact the Bishop was forced to call them back, to interrupt their studies and to banish them to the backwaters of the Province, where they were to gain some 'practical knowledge' of the work of the church. I met the one is Suai, confused, saddened and angry and frightened about what might happen to him now, and the other one in Ossu, beaten up by the military.

I was offered a driver to drive me to the Eastern part of the island, and I went to the police in Dili to apply for a **surat jalan**. At the police headquarters, a massive complex near the Resende Hotel, I was met again by Mr Carlos who looked very serious when I told him what I wanted. The answer was that if I wanted to go to Baucau, Viqueque, Ossu etc. I would only be able to do that in the company of a guide, an

intelligence officer from Intel, i.e. himself. When I said I would be able to bring my own guide (Fr Domingos Soerres da Silva, whose name I did not mention), they said I had to bring him to the police station first so they could check him out. Well, you can probably imagine that I was not too keen on spending my holidays with an Indonesian Intelligence officer (whose hotel costs, travel costs, etc. I had,by the way, to pay), so I declined and went instead to the bus station to catch a bus to the south coast, to an area which according to Mr Carlos was free from Fretilin and declared safe. Little does he know! I had chosen that area because one of the four students came from there, Joao, who had given me contact addresses and drawn a fairly good picture of the trip there.

The bus journey to Zumelei/Suai was a lengthy but memorable one, it took about 10 hours or maybe more, I can't remember exactly, but I left Dili in the dark and arrived in Suai, at the mission station, when it was dark. It's a fantastic trip, partly through riverbeds, because there were no bridges, no tarmac roads down there and only winding curvey steep serpentines. Timor from the bus window seemed like one mass grave. Massive, large wooden crosses on top of hill crests, in the villages, on wind-swept stoney grassplains tell the story, but I didn't have the guts to take photos of them. I would have liked to stay in Maubisse and explored the cemetery there, where the crosses seemed to be piled on top of each other and reaching out into the road. There must have been very heavy fighting, so it seems. The route I had chosen was: Dili - Aileu - Maubisse - Aituto - Ainarro - Zumalai - Beco (Transmigration settlement) - Suai. (You are now south-west close to West Timor). Scenically it was spectacular despite its arid,,stoney terrain, a bit like the Northern Territory of Australia, even parts of NSW (around the Murrumbidgee River), and especially like Greece in summer. The whole first four hours of the trip (all still on tarmac) I marvelled at the fact that guerilla warfare had taken place here, could have taken place here, where every mouse was visible due to a lack of vegetation and sparse growth of trees or undergrowth. Mind you, though, this was towards the end of the day. One thing that puzzled me enormously were the many Timorese in Indonesian army gear with rifles and khakis and all, Hansips, so I was led to believe, a kind of security watchposts who apparently co-operate with Fretilin and/or the population, but officially with the Indonesians; what a place! I bought some Highland coffee in Ainaro, a very beautiful place high up in the mountains, almost a little cold on a rainy afternoon There were a few 'watchposts' on the way where the bus stopped and all passengers' KTB - with the exception of mine - were checked. It must have soured the Timorese no end to be checked in their own country while foreigners walk around freely. Foreigners - rather foreigner, with the exception of Dili I never saw any other Europeans. In fact, in Suai, the **Bupati** and the Sisters told me that in the last 14 years I was the second tourist they had set eyes upon - the only other one had been a geologist, 3 months previously.

Rarmelau had its head in the clouds and looked fairly denuded, apparently a consequence of the 'slash and burn technique' of the Indonesian army to reduce the jungle and its hiding places for the guerrillas. The road is incredibly steep after Ainaru, a lot of coffee, until you get to the green plains around Zumalai. In Zumalai the bus stopped for a little while during which I took the opportunity to talk to some children and their mothers by the wayside. It turned out that these were Balinese transmigrants from the transmigration sites in Beco and Zumalai. A lictle further I saw the first Balinese-style temples at the edge of rice paddies.

After 12 hours of driving - and the final part mainly on dusty roads or washed out, dry riverbeds or bumpy side tracks, because many bridges were down, we arrived just

at dusk in Suai, where I was dropped at the (Catholic) mission station. It was quite a windy, spartan-looking place, and the 3 frightened little faces peering out from behind the kerosine lamp looked at me in utter amazement, before they pulled me inside; as said before, the second tourist for 14 years.

Communication was quite a problem: those languages they spoke, I did not speak - we tried Italian for a while and then resorted to Indonesian, at which, astonishingly enough, they were worse at than me. Politically the three seemed to be of the variety: see no evil, hear no evil: the **bupati** was a GREAT man, on the side of the population rather than of the government; poverty, starvation, hunger prevalent, obtaining water (drinking or washing) a major difficulty. The three days I spent in Suai I practised the art of showering with one scoop of water from a bucket which was fetched daily from a far-away well. The drinking water had an incredibly oily taste. They might have suffered hunger because it was the end of the Dry and there was nothing to harvest. Also the area looked very sandy.

The children milling around the mission station kept on grabbing my hand trying to kiss it. I was deeply touched but who did they mix me up with? Perhaps they thought I was a Sister too? The reverence the people in this area pay to high-ranking people almost seemed feudalistic. The **Bupati** (Rui, a mixed-race from the area) had lent me his car - in the whole of Suai were only about three cars, probably all his,- and wherever people were seeing the car approach they got off their horses, took off their hats and bowed deeply as if the king were coming along.

Next morning they brought me up to the **Bupati's** house, a guy in his early thirties, half Portuguese- half Timorese (just like his wife - an interesting phenomenon, these mixed race Timorese, in terms of who holds the power in Timor), who spoke no English at all. He seemed a bit of a mixcure between 'big-man' and cowboy and according to what people in this area told me, was doing a good job in balancing his favours between the government's interests and the needs of the population. I pretended to be a tourist so we talked a lot about the potential for tourism for his area. We drove around together, visiting a lovely, lonely beach on the south coast, c. 8 km from Suai, where an Australian before '75 had been boring for oil. (Still pumps and pipes visible), the beach fringed with sandalwood trees and traditional East Timor cottages (bamboo/sandalwood huts) where the tired traveller could rest, etc. At my request we also visited the cemetery nearby where a dozen grave-diggers were busy making new graves. But my visit did not yield any new info, I only felt even more frustrated by my handicap of not being able to speak Tetun or Kermak or Portuguese. In any case, the people probably wouldn't have told one anything in the presence of a government official; they looked timid and frightened.

For the rest of the day, the **Bupati** allowed me the use of his truck and so I was free to travel whereever I wanted to. I took Br Berndito and two students from the mission school with me, as guides in case of a flat tyre, etc, and set off immediately towards Zurmalai and Beco, where I wanted to have a good look at the transmigration site. The 'road' (and I have lived for years in the depths of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea!) was really bad and in fact so full of atrocious potholes that you could not go faster than 25/30 km p.h. or else the two students in the back of the truck (standing!) would have fallen off. So, don't let the Indonesians talk you into 'development' of Portugal's badly neglected former colony - certainly no visible development down in the south re bridges, roads or even the simplest form of road maintenance.

The **Bupati** was extremely concerned that I should be acquainted with the full tourist potential of Suai, so I had to be back in the afternoon to attend various villages' dance performances. Very moving, very beautiful, like from times long gone in other parts of the archipelago: an old fiddle and a band of wild-looking older guys formed the orchestra, but also drums and bamboo sticks for the rhythm (like in the Philippines). The dance of the first dancer - a young boy of perhaps thirteen or

fourteen - was particularly dramatic as his feet were in chains, telling the story of the suffering of the Timorese people. His whirling and stomping feet kicked up so much dust that the women on the bamboo instruments were swallowed up by a dust cloud and most of the time practically invisible. Then came a "welcome-the-guest-dance" by the young women with swinging veils and such exciting offerings as **sirih** (betel nut) mustard leaves and lime. And all the while I sat on this chair (a strange thing out in that wilderness) in the middle of this well-swept village compound with Brother Berndito and some other "fat little guy" (who as it turned out later, later, later had been the Ex-Minister of Education/Economic Affairs, José Gonzalves - now bank manager (?) of one of Dili's banks), by the sea and more than 20kms away from this unknown little place called Suai, -"enjoying" total VIP treatment.

Two more such performances were laid on - and everytime I moved off with armsful of presents: drums, blankets, water pots, sandalwood statues... The jolly banker by my side tried to explain the significance of the dances to me, lamenting the fact that Timor had lost all its culture, music, dances and old people who would be able to remember the meaning and the words of their traditional heritage. Everything had been lost in the war, their statues, jewellery, traditional houses the very fabric of the clans and tribes. Knowledge (medical, taboos, songs, kinship, ancestry etc) had been the property of individuals who were no longer there to pass it on to the next generation. He was right. It was sheerly impossible to find a cassette with ethnic/traditional music anywhere in the tradestores in Dili, only modern stuff.

That night I was invited for dinner at the **Bupati's** place and while I don't want to bore you with the details of that sitting - it was mostly in Portuguese (with Portuguese red wine) which I didn't understand (although I read it quite well) or else in Indonesian (which I speak soso). The interesting part occurred right towards the end when, in the middle of the dessert, 6 Fretelin guerillas entered the verandah out of the dark, crossed the room and handed the **Bupati** a letter and disappeared immediately again. Two of them may have been Portuguese, in my surprise I didn't register everything clearly, only a vivid memory of the soldiers/couriers' very long and wild hair. The **Bupati** went outside with them and came back soon : the conversation from then on was totally in Portuguese.

When around midnight, after having been showered with even more presents, I crossed his yard on top of the hill, I saw them men getting ready with large machine guns, there was furious clicking everywhere, for their night watch. In fact, when Bro Berndito and I drove the pick-up down the hill, I saw them everywhere, leaning against trees, crouching,their silhouettes against the dim lamplight in the driveway. It was quite eerie and I did not know what to make of it all.

When I arrived back in 'town', bumping along a narrow grass strip across the mission's soccer field I heard loud shooting. "My God, what a narrow escape", I thought, accelerrating a little faster, until the laughing Brother assured me that the loud banging came from the open-air film show the bank manager had brought with him from Dili, the crowning filale to a ghost promotional film on how to open an account with the Indonesian National Bank. What insanity, I thought, people who don't even have enough water to drink or wash in are unlikely candidates for investment and savings. But, obviously, progress doesn't stop at Suai.

By the way, the area around Zumalai - Boponaro is apparently full of Fretelin sympathisers, members and soldiers - according to Bro Bendito - although for some reason the area has been declared 'a liberated zone', by what, I guess, the Indonesians mean that there are no more clashes with the army and that local military units (Timorese in military garb, Hansips etc) are loyal and in control of FRetelin. What exactly the Bupati's role in all this is is not clear to me. He was praised by all the people I talked to as a 'good man', from which I (perhaps wrongly)

concluded that he was good in keeping the balance between Indonesian interests and the population's welfare. In doing this, however, he seems to have acquired a fair amount of cattle (especially racing horses), and next time one poor Australian 'tourist' loses his way into those regions, s/he will be accommodated, for a fee, at the Bupati's wife's losmen...

Nevertheless I must emphasise their incredible generosity, which enabled me to travel around totally unimpeded looking at the transmigration site at Beco etc - though he was probably fully aware of the limitations of the roads in Kovelirma and surroundings!

Living at a Catholic Mission station brings also a few surprises : lying tucked in on my collapsible camping bed in the mission classroom I was kept awake by the buzzing of a mossie and when I suddenly opened my eyes trying to find my torch, I had the shock of my life - towering above me was this giant, phosphorescent monster, brightly green spread-eagled against the wall, which at closer inspection turned out to be the lofe-size figure of a greenish phosphorising Jesus on a poster from Rome - amazing! I think I had told you already about the kids in that area grabbing my hand at any opportunity to cover it with kisses...I found it difficult to get accustomed to so much exuberance towards my hands - that's why I am mentioning it again. The mission station when I was there was only 'manned' by three timid little Sisters who did not want to discuss politics but let on a lot about the poverty and hunger of this region. Apparently people come to their door begging for food. You can probably imagine how I felt sitting at their dinner table. Although that area is apparently rife with malaria they have no medicine to prevent it. Once back in Jakarta I sent them 500 melaprims and chloroquins from Jakarta, but one wonders how long they are going to last for a population of that size. As a long-standing malaria sufferer myself they had all my sympathies.

Also, linguistically there are problems. The Sisters asked me to send them a Christian song book, in Indonesian, because the new generation is being educated in Indonesian and not allowed to speak Portuguese, the language most educated Timorese most strongly identify with. So people in East Timor are not only losing their land (to the Balinese immigrants), their traditions and culture, but also experience problems and restrictions with regard to the kind of language they are allowed to worship in.

I flew back from Suai (twice a week) to Dili, across brown and burnt-out countryside, steep mountains and finally Tasitolo, the site Pope John II was going to adress the Timorese, a treeless area close to the sea, not a very likely spot the Pope would be tempted to kiss.

I had another couple of days in Dile : a charming place, as far as towns in this archipelago go : wide tree-lined avenues, Portuguese-style villas, intensely flowering colourful bougainvilleas, cacti, brown hills, and en everylasting blue sky. I once again wandered down to Motael, where they were practising hymns etc. for the Pope's visit. The church courtyard was bursting with people, thousands of solemn looking people, many widows dressed in black with veils over their heads, old men booming out their songs (Christus vincit), and loads of small kids on their knees. It seemed to me as if all their energies were focused upon this religion - perhaps their only hope?

Father Ricardo who drove me home refused to come into the hotel - he said that it was full of crooks and spies from the Indonesian Intelligence and that he himself was not a well-liked and tolerated visitor there. None of the Jesuit brothers would come near that place - particularly disliked is Arsenio Hortas (sic) (Ramos Horta's brother) for his collaboration with Intel; fat, large and balding he really looked the part, a sort of Maffioso innkeeper. I kept my distance!

The comings and goings at that hotel never failed to amaze me; they often seemed to tell you Timor's current story more clearly than Mike Vatikokis reports in the Far Eastern Economic Review. One afternoon a group of 6 businessmen from Melbourne arrived, all hush-hush of course, led by Paul Swartz (ex-army training school Bandung) ready to inspect the beaches of Dili for potential tourist development... They had their eyes in particulat on the lovely white sands of Dili's most famous beach - areia branca - where they were going to buy the land to set up an enormous hotel complex. Australian investment, elegant looking Chinese businessmen from Surabaya conducting the negotiations re Timorese land... The ones you never saw were the Timorese people handling their own affairs, being involved in business or determining their own future and prosperity. The restaurants along Santana (Santa Anna) carry names like Coto Makassar, Warung Malang, Rumah Makan Wirma and are entirely owned by Bugis, Javanese, Makassans or Chinese from Surabaya. Never did I see one Timorese-owned/run restaurant or hotel (except Arsenio). They were the waiters, farmers who delivered the tomatoes for my tomato salad, the busdrivers to Suai, impotent people in subservient positions. This question of marginalisation of the native people of East Timor in their own country can't be emphasised enough, I think, and needs to be brought to people's attention. It's not just the Timor Gap agreement.

Saturday night I spent at José Gonzalves' and Olympia's (his wife) house. A dinner party with tinges of Portugal. The conversation went from Racine to Patrick Süskind - but never to politics. We only slowly opened up to each other, but the longer the evening went on the more I began to like and respect the man. I learned - though not from him - that he had raised Nocolso Lobato's oldest son (at present in Jakarta) after his father's death.

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